

2014 Academy Award nominations: Very few bright spots

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The 2014 Academy Award nominations were announced January 16 at a press conference at the Samuel Goldwyn Theater in Beverly Hills, California. Actor Chris Hemsworth and Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences president Cheryl Boone Isaacs read out the list of nominees.

The awards ceremony will be held March 2 at the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood, hosted by Ellen DeGeneres and broadcast by ABC.

Leading the field, David O. Russell's *American Hustle* and Alfonso Cuarón's *Gravity* each received 10 nominations, while Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* obtained nine. Other films to earn a significant number included *Dallas Buyers Club* (Jean-Marc Vallée), *Nebraska* (Alexander Payne) and *Captain Phillips* (Paul Greengrass) with six nominations each, *The Wolf of Wall Street* (Martin Scorsese) and *Her* (Spike Jonze) with five, and *Philomena* (Stephen Frears) with four.

All nine of these most nominated films were named in the Best Picture category.

The five nominees for Best Actor were Christian Bale (*American Hustle*), Bruce Dern (*Nebraska*), Leonardo DiCaprio (*The Wolf of Wall Street*), Chiwetel Ejiofor (*12 Years a Slave*) and Matthew McConaughey (*Dallas Buyers Club*). The Best Actress nominations went to Amy Adams (*American Hustle*), Cate Blanchett (*Blue Jasmine*), Sandra Bullock (*Gravity*), Judi Dench (*Philomena*) and Meryl Streep (*August: Osage County*).

Of the films that received the greatest recognition, Payne's *Nebraska* seems the worthiest choice. It has something to say about contemporary life, and in particular about the desolation of so much of the American Midwest. The WSWs wrote: "It concerns itself with the bleak lives of decent people without prospects, who fill in the gaps with fantasies about striking it rich, stubbornly clinging to a belief in what remains of the tattered American Dream. Everyone in the film is waiting in quiet desperation for some external force or process to change his or her life." Dern is remarkable in the leading role.

Jean-Marc Vallée's *Dallas Buyers Club* is a decent,

compassionate film about the early days of the AIDS crisis and the almost super-human efforts of electrician and occasional rodeo cowboy Ron Woodroof (McConaughey) to survive and help others. Jared Leto, who gives a tour de force performance as an HIV-positive transgender man living as a woman, was also nominated, in the best supporting actor category.

Russell's *American Hustle* is an efficiently done work about the US in the late 1970s, which ends up not saying a great deal, except that ... Americans do hustle. The talented Jennifer Lawrence received a second Academy Award nomination in a row for a Russell film (following *Silver Linings Playbook* in 2013), this year for best supporting actress.

Cuarón's *Gravity*, we wrote on the WSWs, is "a visually arresting and deeply suspenseful work" in which, unhappily, "certain religious themes begin to make themselves felt." *Captain Phillips*, from Britain's Greengrass, is a non-committal film about a hijacking off the coast of Somalia, which ends with a disgraceful tribute to the greatness of the US Navy. Somali Barkhad Abdi received a nomination for best supporting actor for his role in the film.

From veteran British filmmaker Stephen Frears, *Philomena* examines the foul, painful phenomenon of the Magdalene Asylums, facilities for "fallen girls" and women, run by the Catholic Church for centuries on the basis of virtual slave labor. In the end, the film, the WSWs commented, pulls its punches, resulting in a work that is "not entirely whole-hearted or convincing." *Her*, from Spike Jonze, is a slight film about an alienated, introspective individual who feels more comfortable with his talking Operating System than with other humans.

The weakest films among the most nominated are *12 Years a Slave* and *The Wolf of Wall Street*, both touching upon and mangling important subjects, slavery and today's financial predators, respectively.

McQueen's work, based on the true story of a free black man kidnapped and sold into slavery in 1841, we commented, "goes from one hideous detail to another, with

an eye towards maximum exploitation of each episode. ... [McQueen's] conception of the artist, as someone who subjects his audience to suffering, is distinctly postmodernist and distinctly false. It is an evasion of the artist's central responsibility, which is not to *inflict* a given experience, but to *arrive at its truth*."

Scorsese's work is an incoherent mess, which ends up celebrating what it purportedly sets out to criticize, stock swindlers and con artists. We wrote on the WSWS: "Scorsese's latest work is tedious, repetitive and painful to watch. ... At the mid-way point, at the height of the stupid, obnoxious depravity ... it struck me that the film's sordid and demoralizing tone reminded me of Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained*. Bodies were not being torn apart by dogs, but the same cynical and morbidly misanthropic atmosphere prevailed. Everyone, the film tells you, is backward, corrupt, monstrous ..."

Spike Jonze received a nomination for best original screenplay for *Her*, along with Woody Allen for the flat and pointless *Blue Jasmine*, Craig Borten and Melisa Wallack for *Dallas Buyers Club*, Eric Warren Singer and Russell for *American Hustle* and Bob Nelson for *Nebraska*.

The nominees in the best directing category are Russell, Cuarón, Payne, McQueen and Scorsese.

In the documentary feature category, *The Act of Killing*, directed by Joshua Oppenheimer, takes on a serious subject, the CIA-backed massacre of leftists and workers in Indonesia in the 1965 military coup, although its outlook is murky at best. *Dirty Wars*, nominated in the same category, from Jeremy Scahill provides some useful information, but essentially dances around the issue of America's global war on terror, avoiding any explanation of the eruption of violence or any historical perspective. *The Square* (Jehane Noujaim and Karim Amer), which follows a number of professional activists in Egypt from 2011 to 2013, builds a case for middle class, protest politics, not the overthrow of the rotten, oppressive Egyptian regime.

One might complain, the WSWS wrote, in a review of *20 Feet from Stardom*, a documentary about backup singers, directed by Morgan Neville that "it doesn't feature enough of the great music it explores." However, the film "covers so much ground in its 91 minutes it seems fair to suggest that the viewer will have to satisfy his or her interest and curiosity elsewhere. The release of Neville's film is already, deservedly, opening doors and creating audiences for these artists."

A nomination that can be fully endorsed is the one for *Omar*, directed by Hany Abu-Assad, which presents a realistic, sobering picture of Palestinian life under Israeli rule, as best foreign film. In our coverage of the 2013 Toronto film festival, we wrote: "The film points to the

nearly impossible personal and social conditions for the Palestinians under Israeli rule. As the director explained in our conversation, under the intense pressures friendships and relationships can change, deteriorate and turn into their opposite. *Omar* brings to life the tragic situation in intimate, concrete detail."

In an interview, Abu-Assad told us: "I think my artistic motivation is to be a witness to history. One hundred years from now, people will still look back on movies that are not just great stories, but also showed what happened in that period of time. To witness history, from my point of view. History is something we all write together."

For the most part, however, *Nebraska*, *Omar* and a few of the others notwithstanding, it is a dreary chore at this point to analyze the Academy Award proceedings. The award ceremony and associated events are as predictable and embalmed as much of the rest of official American public life, and about as unblemished by the influence of real life.

A year ago, Seth MacFarlane functioned dreadfully as host. He was unfunny, crude and irritating. We already know more or less what to expect from DeGeneres, a snide, self-satisfied conformist.

Some things are easier to predict than others. We are willing to wager any amount of money that on the March 2 broadcast no one will stick his or her nose out. 2013 was one of the most tumultuous years in a very long time. It is nonetheless guaranteed that on a widely watched broadcast dedicated to the most popular art form of our time, an art form that still draws masses of spectators annually, none of the presenters or winners will mention Edward Snowden, the NSA, drones, Egypt, Syria, martial law in Boston, poverty, food stamps, the Detroit bankruptcy ...



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